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ABSTRACT

The existence of compulsory school attendance at the secondary level may help to assure school attendance for some students, but it does little to assure that any will learn. Both the laws requiring attendance and the basic high school programs offered in most states must be remodeled. Arizona's system provides a good example. Although Arizona's attendance laws require only that a child attend school through the eighth grade, most students stay through high school. A number of factors account for the schools' retention of students. One is the state's child labor laws that limit the number of available worthwhile jobs for youths under age 16. Another is the state's program of work-study courses, vocational education, and career education. It is hoped that a student's exposure to these kinds of courses and programs will help him set a personal goal or develop an idea of what he wants for the future. The state also has an extensive special education program for meeting the needs of students who have difficult learning experiences and who are prime candidates to become dropouts. Finally, societal pressure and self-respect help keep students in school until they have acquired enought education to enable them to be self-supporting and productive. (Author/IRT)

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COMPULSORY EDUCATION: KEEP, CHANGE OR ABOLISH?

The idea of compulsory education has been with civilized man for a very long time, over 2000 years to be specific. In 170 B.C. the Jews made education compulsory for boys when they reached the age of 6.

Prussia was the first country to make education compulsory for it's people and that was almost 200 years ago in 1787.

So we can see that nations have long recognized the importance of an educated citizenry. As Thomas Jefferson said, "A nation cannot be ignorant and free."

If we agree with that statement, isn't it ironic that we must compel our people to become educated in order to remain free?

Wouldn't it be nice to think that we as educators could make education so attractive to the younger child that compulsory education laws would be unneccessary?

Unfortunately, as yet no one has found a method by which this can be accomplished. It's been said that even were a simple injection available by which reading, science, and math could be placed in the mind of a child, we would still have children who would try to avoid receiving the injection. I suppose we would then need a compulsory education injection law.

Generally, the children in our country are required to attend school between the ages of 6 and 16 or 18, depending on the law of the state in which they live. There are, of course, a variety of exceptions, such as for the mentally or physically handicapped, excessive distance, a need to work, etc.

Only one state, ~~Missippi~~ Mississippi, is without any form of compulsory education. This came about when the compulsory education law was repealed in 1956, with the intent of preserving racial segregation. Thus, we are provided an example for study to see what can happen when education becomes a matter of choice. From a 1973 article by Stephen Arons entitled

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Compulsory Education: America in Mississippi we find many interesting facts about what has happened since compulsory education was abolished.

First we ask, do children go to school when not compelled to do so? Many do, of course, but one estimate is that at any one time as many as 48,000 to 100,000 children are not enrolled in school.

Why aren't they? What are they doing?

Several reasons for non-attendance are offered. One being that many poor people cannot afford to go to school. Some parents cannot afford clothing or books or school supplies, and simple pride will not allow them to admit to their poverty publicly. Some children need to work to earn whatever meager wage they can or stay home baby-sitting for the younger children so mother can work.

Many students who stay in school find upon graduating that dropouts have gotten all the jobs and have collected experience and seniority, while those who stayed in school studied at courses that gave them no useful knowledge and bored them to death.

Some students drop out to save their self-respect. Without compulsory attendance, teachers know they don't have to deal with anyone they find difficult and can drive them to drop out.

Finally, a large number of children are expelled. The repeal of compulsory schooling betokens a general take-it-or-leave-it feeling on the part of the state government about what it is willing to do for children. Community workers employed by the local federal Emergency School Assistance programs to help bring youngsters back to public school say that the number of expelled students is both astronomical and unjustifiable, expulsions sometimes following such minor offenses as gum chewing or scuffling in the hall.

As to the question of what those not attending school do, the answer would seem to be --- not much. There are neither jobs nor socially significant roles for most children. A Mississippi juvenile court judge believes

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that the greatest cause of juvenile delinquency in this country has been non-attendance on a regular basis in school.

It seems the most prevalent concern of those who want compulsory education restored in Mississippi is economic. Mississippi is the poorest state in the union as measured by per capita income. A statewide study commissioned by the state Research and Development Council concluded that Mississippi's economic development goals cannot be achieved unless it greatly strengthens it's entire education system. Many industries decide against locating in Mississippi because the technical labor supply is inadequate.

Unskilled laborers are a liability. They can't work because of increasing mechanization of farming, so they must be taken care of with unemployment and welfare. Economic productivity is related to educational level, and the drain of unemployment and welfare cannot be ended until the state's economic standards are raised.

To quote the source of my information, "Forty-nine states demonstrate daily that compulsory education does not by itself eliminate social injustices or provide a way out of poverty or stimulate personally valuable education. One state, Mississippi, demonstrates that freeing children from compulsory schooling when they have no resources of their own, and when society offers them no real role and support, is not in the interest of freedom, equality, of humanism."

We've just been shown a pretty bleak picture of what it can be like. I suppose it doesn't have to be that way, but this is the only example we have to go by.

But really, I don't believe the controversy of compulsory schooling is concerned much with elementary education. According to a 1973 Gallup poll, over 90% of the public favors compulsory attendance at least through the elementary school years. Disagreement over compulsory school attendance seems to center on the secondary school level. In the same Gallup poll,

compulsory attendance was favored at the senior high level by only 73% of the general public and 56% of the professional educators.

Now I have a confession to make. At the time I was asked to present my views on compulsory education at this clinic, I had none! In Arizona there is no controversy and I had just never given it a thought. As I'm sure you all probably know, a woman rarely turns down an opportunity to express her views on anything --- so I set about acquiring some to express.

One of the first articles I read on the subject was from the magazine School Management, October 1974 entitled "Should the Compulsory School Age Be Lowered?" It seems that last year after an exhaustive study of this question, the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education concluded, "The nation does not need laws that force adolescents to go to school. It needs schools and school-related programs that make adolescents wish to come." The commission recommended "The formal school leaving age should be dropped to age fourteen." This recommendation produced much surprise and controversy. The article I read consisted of the comments of ten highly respected educators from across the country, one being our own NSBA President Philip Swain. Their comments were in response to the questions: Do you agree with the recommendation of the commission that the school age be lowered to 14? and Why? Only two of these ten men agreed with the recommendation of the commission. The other eight just didn't think it could work.

Now this article was really an eye-opener for me. In my blissful state of ignorance I hadn't realized such a controversy even existed. You see, Arizona's law is basically 14 yrs. or conceivably even 12 or 13. It's one of those "exceptions" I mentioned earlier that most of the state's compulsory education laws have attached to them. This particular exception says the child is excused from attending school if he or she has completed the grammar school course prescribed by the State Board of Education.

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"Grammar school" in Arizona being through the 8th grade, and the majority of 8th graders being 14 years old upon graduation, our age of completion is basically 14 years.

I might explain that this is no secret in our state. The law was made by our Terretorial Legislature in 1899. An Arizonan if asked what the compulsory education requirements are would probably say "through the 8th grade" and perhaps not even know the actual ages are listed as 8 - 16 yrs. The reason I stress this point is probably fairly obvious. This point handed me a whole bunch of the "views" I was seeking on a platter. They were the ideas on compulsory attendance I grew up with in Arizona. All I had to do now was look around me at how things are done in my state and tell you why non-compulsory education at the high school level works for us and how well it works.

Another very important reason for stressing my point that non-compulsory secondary education does work is to prove that eight men can be wrong ----- and what woman in her right mind could pass up a chance like that?

Now I'm not going to try to tell you that we in Arizona have all the answers or that no problems exist. But on the whole, I think we are satisfied with our system and indeed Arizona has produced her share of successful, well-educated people. We have three state universities, none of them lacking students.

There are many combined factors that account for the fact that most of our students choose to continue their education past the 8th grade and on through the 12th grade.

One major reason for a child choosing to continue beyond the 8th grade or at least until 16 years of age is our child-labor law. To be employed under the age of 16 a child must present the employer with a certificate which states that he is excused from school attendance for one of the

acceptable reasons, such as 8th grade completion. The employer must then immediately file the certificate with the county school superintendant, together with a statement of the nature of employment. Other laws prescribe the type of work allowable and the hours which a child may work. These restrictions limit the number of available worthwhile jobs to where most students find it more practical to continue school until they are at least sixteen.

By that time, it is hoped that through exposure to work-study courses, vocational education, and career education the student has enough maturity to have set himself a goal or an idea of what he wants for the future.

Arizona realized a long time ago that with our main industries being agriculture and mining, vocational education was absolutely necessary to make school meaningful for many. We also found vocational education to be the type most desired by our large percentage of minority races, mainly Mexican-American and Indian.

About 2 years ago, Arizona became a pilot state for Career Education. We now have a very comprehensive program beginning in kindergarten and continuing through grade 12. It's too soon to tell how much impact this will eventually have on our students desires to continue their education. But the initial signs are excellent and we have great hope for this program. By early exposure to the various careers open to them, we hope to help students set their goals sooner. We can then better design our curriculum to match their needs.

We have also recognized that students who have never learned to read or who have had difficult learning experiences are prime candidates as dropouts. We have a recent state mandate for increased special education, so that every school district in the state can provide these students with programs for special learning disabilities, remedial reading programs, etc. This should make it possible for those who would otherwise give up, to be successful students and make further education a practical and desirable goal.

Somewhere in here I should mention the factors of societal pressure and self-respect. A student is expected by his parents and peers to at least acquire enough education to enable him to be self-supporting and productive, and thereby giving him self-respect.

I feel that because secondary education is not compulsory in Arizona, we as educators are even more accountable for the quality of our education. If we see we are losing students, we know we must take a closer look at our program and see where we are failing to provide their needs.

I believe our dropout rate to be no worse than most states and not as bad as others. It's nearly impossible to find statistics on how many students actually drop out, never to return. The statistics I do have, however, show me that on a statewide basis our big dropout point is after the 10th grade or when the student is sixteen and can hold a regular job. Also the percentage of dropouts is highest among the minority races.

As I said before, we don't have all the answers, but we're certainly working to find them. In the meantime, our high schools are places for learning, not custodial institutes. Our administrators can devote more of their time to improving the educational program rather than to policing attendance. And because most of the students are there to learn the disruptive influences are fewer.

I hope in presenting these views I haven't sounded smug or boastful. I <u>am</u> proud of our educational system in Arizona. But where this idea of non-compulsory secondary education is relatively new to many of you, we've had 75 years to learn by trial and error what is workable and what is not, and we are obviously still learning.

The existence of compulsory school attendence at the secondary level may help assure school attendance for some students, but does little to assure that <u>any</u> will learn. If we are to achieve today's goals in education I feel both the laws requiring attendance and the basic high school programs

offered in most states must be remodeled. I believe Arizona's system is a good example to follow when drawing up your blueprint.